

Interview with LTGEN George R. Christmas, USMC (Ret.), commanding officer of Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Wounded in the Battle of Hue City, Vietnam, February 1968 and recipient of the Navy Cross. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 25 February 2005.

Where are you from originally, General?

I was born in Philadelphia, PA, raised in West Philadelphia until 3rd grade, and then moved to the Borough of Yeadon just across from West Philadelphia. I lived in Yeadon, went to High School there, graduated from Yeadon High School, and went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Upon graduation, I was commissioned a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve with a 2-year obligation. I had gone through what in those days we called the contract NROTC program. Everybody had the draft over their heads in those days. I joined NROTC. There were four of us who had the Marine option when I graduated in 1962.

So I went off to the Marine Corps for 2 years, liked what I was doing, extended for a year, and then augmented. The rest, of course, is history. Thirty-four and a half years later, I retired in September of 1996.

How did you get to Vietnam?

My first tour of duty was at Camp Lejeune with the 2nd Marine Division. I was selected to go to the Marine Barracks at 8th and I Streets in Washington in 1965, the same year my wife and I married. We were there for 2 years. I was a company commander and commanded the Headquarters Company. In 1967 I was transferred to Vietnam.

What unit were you attached to?

On arrival in Vietnam, I was initially the Commanding Officer of Service Company of the Headquarters Battalion of the 1st Marine Division. Shortly thereafter, I was reassigned as the Commanding Officer of H or Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines.

I flew out to An Hoa, which was south and west of Danang. At the time the MACV organization was going through what was called "Operation Checkers." [GEN William] Westmoreland felt that he really needed to reinforce the Demilitarized Zone and the western portion of northern I Corps. So that's when the 26th Marines went out to Khe Sanh. And they pushed other units up to Con Thien and closer to the DMZ. The 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines had been ordered up to Phu Bai, just south of Hue. Hotel Company was the advance party that went from An Hoa south and west of Danang up to Phu Bai. At that time, we started to have the first inklings that something was going on.

How did you find out about Tet? Was it very graphic where you were?

Yes it was. Hotel Company had gone up to Phu Bai and were there no more than 24 hours when the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which was down in the Phu Loc region, got into a great deal of trouble. We went down as a relief force. We relieved 1/5, then moved into an area of operations which was south of the Troi River. Hotel Company took that area between An Cu Pass and the Troi River bridges. Then, eventually, the entire 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines came into that area and joined us.

We were in that area when Tet of '68 began. I remember it very distinctly. The truce had been declared. Things were going wrong. The truce was off. My company was dispatched across an area where I had one platoon up on several bridges between two villages on Route 1 and several others where I put ambush sites out. On the night of the 30th of January the platoon guarding those two bridges and the combined action platoon that was up forward of them were struck by approximately two companies, perhaps a battalion size North Vietnamese force.

The bridges held. I mounted out the company and we counterattacked. We brought in our ambushes as we came and then drove off the enemy. By the end of the night of the 30th we had pressed the enemy against the Troi River. Fox Company had come up on our flank. We were about to finish the fight when we got stopped. We didn't know this at the time but things were happening up north. Hue City had been completely taken except for the MACV compound and the 1st ARVN Division headquarters. The MACV compound was on the southern side of the Perfume River. The ARVN headquarters was up in the Citadel on the northern side.

We would then begin a series of piecemeal movements up to Phu Bai. Fox Company was pulled off and they were moved immediately to Phu Bai. I was pulled off and we immediately began to guard the bridges to hold Route 1 open. The next morning we were ordered to Phu Bai.

Successively, then, over the next 3 or 4 days of February, the entire 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, minus one company left back in the Troi River valley, would then be piece-mealed into the battle for Hue City. We were all in Hue by the 5th and then began to retake the city.

What do you recall about that fight?

City fighting, as you've read now about Falluja and other places, is the dirtiest of all fighting. It's very intense. It's a very personal fight. Your enemy is within 35 meters or less. You see him; he sees you. One or the other wins.

From a medical standpoint, it's the most difficult. There's the debris effect. In my company, every one of our Marines was wounded at least once or twice. The wounds aren't necessarily bullets or shrapnel but debris. A large shell hits the concrete next to you and concrete fragments become missiles. Or you tear up legs, arms, and knees in the rubble. It's a very casualty producing environment. In that battalion, there were very few who were not wounded.

I understand that a lot of corpsmen were also wounded.

That's correct. Everything was up close and personal and corpsmen never left their charges. They're always there and up front. After we had seized the city and were pushing out, I lost two squad leaders and a corpsman. All three were the most popular kids in the organization.

And you were badly injured.

I was wounded on the 13th day. I was hit by an RPG and then some mortars after that.

The RPG wasn't enough. You had to have mortars, too?

I remember that so very well. We had seized the southern portion of the city by then and had pushed out into the western area. In fact, by chance we had overrun an NVA base camp. I had just called my platoon commanders to direct the fight. I then looked over my shoulder and about 75 or 100 meters away was a North Vietnamese soldier with an RPG. And he let it go. I

said, "You've gotta be kidding me. I'm not a tank. You're not supposed to shoot that thing at me." It hit behind me and the shrapnel went through my left leg.

Was there any first aid rendered?

Oh, yes. My corpsmen were there immediately. They wrapped the leg real good and I tried to get them to move me to an area where I could direct the fight. They put me down beside a building. Unfortunately, when the mortars walked in, they walked in straight, and my gunny and my radio operator dove on top of me. They didn't get hit at all but my arm was hanging out underneath and I got a few more hits.

But the corpsmen were always there. I don't know if you were there when I dedicated the wonderful sculpture that's in the National Naval Medical Center. My words that day were exactly how I felt. When you called "Corpsman up," they're always there, and always have been. And, quite frankly, I'm somebody that Navy medicine has saved many times.

How did they get you out of there?

This is a story. We had created our own little ambulance service. I suppose today, I'd probably get in trouble for this. Our company had liberated six vehicles. We had three of these little hatchbacks that the mail used to be delivered in--little jeeps. We used those as ammunition vehicles and stacked them full of small arms ammo. And if we'd run low, they'd get up as close as they could to the front line and we'd carry the ammo in.

We also got three pickup trucks. We liberated some mattresses and they became our ambulances and we did the same thing with them.

They pulled up one of the ambulances as close as they could and were able to throw me on the back and whisk me to our battalion med, which was right in the city. Battalion med patched me a little bit and then sent me down to Regimental med, which was about 10 blocks at the point where the stadium was and where they had an evacuation capability. After some patching up there . . . I can't tell you the time line on this. I had no recognition of how many minutes or hours had passed.

I was evacuated on a CH-53 helicopter. I can remember this. My partner on the rack of stretchers in there was a North Vietnamese soldier who had been wounded and captured. We went down to Danang. There were so many wounded at the time that instead of me going to the Naval Support Activity, which was on one side of the Danang Air Base, I ended up on the Air Force side and in the Air Force medical facility. And I proceeded to be lost for about 2 months.

I was getting good medical care but I was lost in the system. My poor wife knew that I was wounded but didn't know where I was. I ended up in the Air Force system. I was on the ward. I'm not sure if I got malaria or what. But I got a huge infection and temperature.

I remember waking up on a ward but I'm the only one there. I looked down and here comes a figure in white coming up the ward. And I'm saying, "Is this something in the beyond or what?" It turned out to be an Air Force nurse. All the casualties had been moved on, but because I had this infection from the wounds, they kept me there.

Then they evacuated me down to Cam Ranh Bay still in the Air Force system. There my wounds were debrided further.

What was the nature of your wounds?

I took the shrapnel from the RPG in the back of my left knee. It came through just behind the knee. Later it was determined that it took both the nerves--the motor and the sensory nerve and put an aneurysm on the major artery, which we didn't know. There was a lot of debris and a huge infection. The other shrapnel wounds from the mortars were to my arms--nothing major.

I'm guessing now, but about a month and a half had passed and they evacuated me to the Yokosuka Naval Hospital. That was the first time I was able to call my wife. While there, the wound still would not heal so they decided to go in. Fortunately, they had a vascular surgeon along with the surgical team. After putting a tourniquet on the leg, they went in behind the knee and the artery burst, which they tied off. They then separated the veins as much as possible and, because they were able to keep it stationary for about 48 to 72 hours, the veins picked up the flow. While I didn't have a pulse, I had at least blood flow to the foot. They had thought about taking the leg before and I said, no. They thought about it again but I kept it.

Eventually, I was evacuated back to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital and then went through a series of three or four surgeries. The first was to repair the artery. They took a vein from my right leg, clipped the clot out of the major artery in my left leg, and dropped in the vein. It has worked from that time on.

Then they went after the nerves. They were able to pull together the sensory nerve with all its million circuits, but the motor nerve was just too badly gone and scarred so there was nothing they could do.

Through the years, I've regained sensation all the way down through my ankle. I was able to stay in the Marine Corps and hide for a while and get well enough to run and push. I've got a very fused ankle that's a bit off on a cant and atrophied below the knee but it never has stopped me.

Another thing about Philadelphia. Philadelphia Naval Hospital was the amputee center at the time. If you ever felt sorry for yourself, you climbed in your wheelchair and went down to the wards and you didn't feel sorry for yourself anymore.

It sounds like you were determined to stay in the Corps.

I was very blessed. Here's a great story. Navy chiefs are my heroes. In those days, when they were going to release you, they'd transfer you to the nearest Marine Barracks and you'd vegetate there until they processed you out. Well, I had convinced the doctors that I needed a year's limited duty, not the normal 6 months. And they did it.

I had two friends who were in the assignment branch at the Marine Corps. One is John Ripley, who you probably know. The other was Tom Hemingway. I called Tom. He said, "All you have to do is get me a piece of paper sending you from the hospital to the barracks. That's all I need."

So, what do you do? You find yourself a chief. You find the master chief of the hospital and say, "Hey Chief. I really need . . ."

"Not a problem, Captain. I'll take care of that. Well, he gets me this signed transfer order and I send it off to Hemingway and Ripley. They then hid me out at what we call our basic school, which is where we train all our lieutenants. So I was training lieutenants out there at Quantico. They took all my medical records and they started a campaign of sending them off.

They sent them to the recruiting sergeant in Des Moines, Iowa. When he finally got around to saying, "These don't belong here," and sent them back, then they'd send them off somewhere else. So my records never caught up with me.

Things were going well and I was getting a little bit better all the time. Then I went to Amphibious Warfare School and was still helping myself recover. Then they made a mistake and sent me to a jump billet at Fort Bragg. Well, I couldn't jump out of airplanes but that turned out to be the greatest thing that could have happened because I made my way in other ways and did well.

But my year's limited duty came up at that time. So I took my Form 88 and 89. At that time, Fort Bragg was one of the draftee centers for the Army. I stood in line with all the draftees in my skivvy drawers and my 88 and 89. The doctor never looked below my waist. They found me fit for all duty. My next physical was not for 3 years so I had 3 more years to recover. And by the end of that 3, I was running the PFT and, again, the rest is history.

You say you retired in '96. What did you do after that?

Well, I'm still with the Marine Corps and with the Joint Forces Command. I do three things. I'm what they call a Senior Mentor. I'm a Senior Mentor for the Marine Air-Ground Task Force Staff Training program (MSTP). We have a team of four senior officers and a complete military training team. We work with all our Marine Expeditionary Forces with their Commanding Generals and their staffs and help them plan for future operations.

Then I do the same thing for the Joint Forces Command. I'm the Senior Mentor for them. I go around and work with Joint Task Force Commanders and their staffs and help prepare them for the things we do today.

In my spare time I'm the President of the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation. I do that for love and pro bono. We're building the National Museum of the Marine Corps. We'll finish the building in May of 2006. We'll be doing things from August onward in 2006.

When you were in Vietnam, what was your rank?

I was a captain.

Do you remember any of the corpsmen you dealt with back then?

Perhaps the one I remember the most was our battalion chief corpsman, Lou LeGarie. He lives in Menlo Park, CA. Lou is a story all by himself. He only wore the Navy uniform once then went with the Marines and stayed with the Marines forever. He always wore the Marine greens. He is something else. He's a legend to all Marines. He can tell you more stories.

Was he at Hue City with you?

He sure was. He has a long illustrious history with the Marine Corps. He was intimately part of that entire battle.

General, I want to thank you for spending time with me today. It was a treat.

It was my pleasure.